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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses problems faced by Arab learners of English in general, focusing on problems specific to English language majors/graduates at Arab World University. It highlights the situation with Jordanian students, noting various causes of their problems with English (e.g., school and English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of exposure to the target language in language teaching, lack of exposure to the target language as spoken by native speakers, and student attitudes and motivation). The paper discusses the notion of communicative competence, in particular strategic competence, and its relationship with language teaching as it leads to learning. It defines strategic competence (the ability to use communication strategies to get a message across and compensate for limited knowledge of rules of the language), explains communication strategies (which are employed when the second language speaker encounters a problem in communication), and looks at taxonomies of communication strategies. The paper discusses how the use of communication strategies leads to learning and concludes with the pedagogical implications of using communication strategies. (Contains 35 references.) (SM)

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Communication Problems Facing Arab Learners of English

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Communication Problems Facing Arab Learners of English: A Personal Perspective

Abstract

This paper discusses the problems of Arab learners of English in general. It also focuses on the problems specific to Arab World University English language majors/graduates with a special focus on the Jordanian situation and the causes of their problems along with my personal views. This paper also discusses the notion of communicative competence and more specifically strategic competence, and its relationship with language teaching as it leads to learning. Then it briefly deals with the definition of strategic competence, communication strategies and taxonomies of communication strategies (CSs). Then, the paper concludes with the pedagogical implications of the use of communication strategy.

General Problems of Arab Learners of English

Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. This fact has been clearly stated by many researchers, e.g. Abdul Haq (1982), Harrison, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abbad (1988) and Wahba (1998).The students in Jordan, for example, learn English in their native country, where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English in Jordan is through formal instruction, i.e. inside the classroom where the language teachers at school are native speakers of Arabic. There is little opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language. This is only possible when students encounter native speakers of English who come to the country as tourists, and this rarely happens.

English is not used in daily situations. Arabic is the language used everywhere. The situation is different in the United Arab Emirates, for example, where people use English in their daily lives because of the multilingual nature of the residents. It is thus more difficult for Jordanian learners of English to communicate in the target language in real life situations.

To shed light on the problems of Arab learners of English, the following are examples taken from different countries. In Jordan, for example, many studies have been conducted to investigate lexical, syntactical and phonological errors committed by Jordanian school learners of English (e.g., Abdul Haq, 1982; Zughoul and Taminian, 1984). Abdul Haq (1982: 1) states that "One of the linguistic areas in which students in the secondary cycle commit errors is in the writing skill". He adds "There are general outcries about the continuous deterioration of the standards of English proficiency of students among school teachers, university instructors and all who are concerned with English language teaching". In support of Abdul Haq's view, Zughoul (1984:4) found that "Jordanian EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English".

In Jordan, there are specific goals in the teaching of English at the secondary stage. Among these, students should be able to write English passages that are grammatically correct, properly punctuated and effectively organised, and to understand and communicate using a variety of notions and linguistic functions based on everyday situations. Accordingly, all Jordanian secondary school graduates are expected to develop native–like facility in English which will enable them to communicate spontaneously, effectively and confidently about a broad range of

topics (Jayyusi et al, 1990). The results of the studies conducted in Jordan led to the conclusion that the goals set by the Ministry of Education were ambitious and had not yet been achieved.

In Sudan, Kambal (1980) analysed errors in three types of free compositions written by first-year Sudanese University students. The study gives an account of the major syntactic errors in the verb phrase and the noun phrase in an attempt to improve the quality of the remedial English programme in the context of Arabisation in Sudan.

Kambal (ibid.) reported on three main types of error in the verb phrase: verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement. He discussed errors in tense under five categories: tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses. With regard to subject-verb agreement, three types of error were identified. These involved the third-person singular marker used redundantly, and the incorrect form of the verb to be.

Egyptian learners of English also face problems. Some of these problems are summarised by Wahba (1998:36):

> Egyptian students face certain problems related to pronunciation. Some of these problems are related to stress, others are related to intonation. However, most of these problems can be attributed to the differences in pronunciation between English and Arabic.

In Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the situation is even worse because children start learning English in grade 7 (first preparatory class). Abbad (1988:15) admits the weakness of Yemen Arab learners of English: "in spite of the low proficiency level in English of most applicants, they are accepted into the department". This is what happens in most of the universities in Arab world countries.

English language departments accept high school graduates without taking into consideration their proficiency level and whether or not they will be able to manage.

Another important area of difficulty that Arab learners of English have is communication. Arab learners find it difficult to communicate freely in the target language. This may be due to the methods of language teaching and the learning environment, which may be said to be unsuitable for learning a foreign language. This fact is very noticeable in Jordan because the formal language of communication is Arabic

Arab English Department Majors' Problems and Causes

M experience as teacher of English as a foreign language in schools and other educational institutions in Jordan, Oman and UAE leads me to believe that English language graduates in Jordan, where Arabic is the native language, find difficulties in using English for communication. When engaged in authentic communicative situations, they often lack some of the vocabulary or language items they need to get their meaning across. As a result, they cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period of time.

There have been a lot of complaints made about the weakness of school graduates in English who join the universities as English language majors and English language learners in general. Several articles have addressed this issue and several studies have been conducted for the purpose of highlighting this problem. As a result of the seriousness of the problem, *The First Conference on the Problems of Teaching English Language and Literature at Arab Universities* was held in the University of Jordan/Amman in 1983. Many papers were presented at the

conference. The most important articles that tackled the students' problems were those of Suleiman (1983) and Mukattash (1983).

Zughoul (1987) argues that "well-documented research evidence on the competence of the English major is scanty, but examples of general impressionistic evaluation are available in a variety of references." Zughoul (1985) reported the results of the proficiency testing of the graduates of the English department at Yarmouk University, Jordan, where the standards were judged to compare forwardly with those of the rest of the Arab universities. The average equated mean score of the three groups of graduates (168 students) who took the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP) was 67.75 (individual scores were 68.22, 69.02, and 66.02), which is interpreted in the manual of the test as "not proficient enough to take any academic work." This average mean score indicates that just a few of our graduates would qualify for admission into the freshmen program of an English language university" (Zughoul, 1987:224).

In evaluating the English competence of the graduates of the University of Jordan, Ibrahim (1983:23) found that most faculty members are not totally happy with the quality of English with which the graduates leave. In fact, these faculty members are often embarrassed when asked by the principal of a private school or a business manager to recommend one of the graduates. Ibrahim states that on one occasion, "in all honesty I could not recommend any of our graduates for that year".

The results of the TOEFL test administered by Rababah (Rababah, 2001) of English majors (160 students) at Yarmouk University in Jordan support these claims, as the individual scores ranged

from 26 percent to 72 percent When compared to TOEFL test standards, the top score was 510. The average means score was 59.32. This average mean score indicates the low proficiency level of English majors.

The weakness of English language learners in general, and English language department majors/graduates more specifically, has been attributed to various factors: lack of knowledge on the part of school graduates when they join the university, school and English language department curricula, teaching methodology, lack of the target language environment and the learners' motivation (Suleiman,1983; Mukattash,1983; Zughoul, 1983, 1987; Ibrahim,1983).

An important article presented at *The First Conference on the Problems of Teaching English language and Literature at Arab Universities* was that of Mukattash (1983). Mukattash divided the problems that Arab learners of English face into two types. First, university students continue to make some basic and frustrating errors in pronunciation, spelling, morphology and syntax. Secondly, they cannot express themselves "comfortably and efficiently either when dealing with 'academic topics' or 'common everyday topics' (1983:169). He argued that the students' major difficulty arises from the fact that they cannot use English correctly and appropriately either in the classroom or outside it when they are required to do so. This means that the difficulty is related to the students' deficiencies in communicative competence and self-expression. He also attributed the students' failure in using English as a tool of self expression to achieve their communicative goals to the study plans and methods of teaching (1983:169).

Suleiman (1983) argued that the continuing dissatisfaction with the performance of Arab students in English courses suggests a lack of fundamental standards in curriculum design,

testing and oral communication skills, the development of productive skills, teaching / learning strategies at university level, etc.

Zughoul (1983) examined the curricula of a number of English departments at Arab universities (the University of Baghdad, Iraq; Damascus, Syria; Kuwait, Kuwait; Yarmouk, Jordan; Amman, Jordan) and at two American universities in the Middle East, and concluded that the curricula of these departments (with the exception of the American University of Beirut) were heavily dominated by the literature component. He adds that "the study of English literature does not only dominate the syllabus of the English department, but also shapes the syllabus of the secondary schools" (1983:222). According to Zughoul, in English language and literature "the other two components of the syllabus – namely, language and linguistics – show a lack of balance in the curriculum, where the language component in particular stands out as the weakest" (1987:223). The language component typically includes two courses in communication skills and a course in writing. Zughoul (ibid.) claims "Rarely does a department in a TW country offer solid language training, i.e. training in reading comprehension, listening comprehension, term paper writing, or speech. In fact, the curriculum assumes that the incoming student is proficient in the language and that he does not need any further language training. This, indeed, is a very unrealistic assumption" (p. 223).

Furthermore, about one-third of the Bachelor degree courses are taught in Arabic, especially in the Faculty of Arts and Education. These courses include Islamic Studies, Arabic, Social Studies, History, Computer Science and Education. I think that the remainder of the courses may not be enough to help those graduates communicate freely and effectively in the target language. They

are thus likely to face some difficulties in their performance. I suggest that it would be better and helpful if such courses were taught in English rather than in Arabic. Halliday et, al., when discussing ways of learning a foreign language, say:

> "In Nigeria, English is used in almost all the teaching in high schools. This has two important results. In the first place, the quantity of classroom experience that each pupil receives is much greater outside the English lesson than within it. Some people have said that if the English language lessons were removed entirely from the schools in Nigeria, little or no effect would be noticed on the ability of the pupils in English when they came to leave schools. But, in the second place, the children are influenced by class teachers other than those who are trained in English. If those teachers' English is not very good, the pupils will suffer. Teaching in a language is an excellent way of teaching a language, but all those who teach subjects in the foreign language need to be able to perform well in it themselves." (Halliday et al., 1984:18)

If this is the case in high schools, it would be even more advisable to use English in teaching all the courses at university level. I am, therefore, of the opinion that all university courses except Arabic language course(s) should be taught in English, which would certainly improve the university students' linguistic ability, which would, in turn, improve their communicative competence.

The lack of knowledge on the part of the incoming English majors have could be another reason for this phenomenon. Suleiman (1983:128) claims that the school graduates lack the knowledge, which might help them to communicate. Basing his arguments on his observations and his personal experience, he claims that the transition from an introductory level, i.e. school, to a

more advanced level, i.e. the university, is "as difficult as passing from the lack of knowledge to an introductory level". Zughoul (1987:224) supports Suleiman's point of view when he questions the competence of the incoming students: "In fact, it can be safely generalized that the linguistic competence of the incoming student and, for that matter, even the graduate from a TW university, does not enable him to make sense of a literary piece, let alone appreciate it".

Suleiman (1983:129) argues that the most noticeable problems which impede the progress of Arab students at university level may be attributed to the "inadequate mastery of the four language skills; namely listening, speaking, reading and writing". This supports Zughoul's claim (1987) that English language departments should offer solid language training. Suleiman adds that the major problem faced by students who attend the university is that they find it difficult to communicate in the target language. According to Suleiman, mother tongue interference is not the only factor responsible, but also a lot more may be attributed to the teaching/learning process as a whole.

In order for language learners to use the language more successfully, they should be involved in real-life situations. But unfortunately, in Jordan English is used only as an academic subject, when it is taught in a school or at the university. Without practice, English or any other language cannot be acquired. English Language Department graduates do not have enough practice in English; they use Arabic most of the time even after becoming English language teachers. They only use English when they encounter a situation where they are obliged to use English as a medium of communication and, to tell the truth, this hardly ever happens. We may therefore

come to the conclusion that most of those graduates' speaking time is in Arabic. Practice is very important for mastering any language. Halliday et al. (1984) suggest that:

> "Oral mastery depends on practising and repeating the patterns produced by a native speaker of the foreign language. It is the most economical way of thoroughly learning a language.... When one has such a control of the essentials of a language, he can almost automatically produce the usual patterns of that language" (1984: 16).

This shows the importance of using the target language in language teaching. Teachers in Jordan use Arabic to teach difficult words and to explain English literature. This was indeed a feature of my teaching experience in Jordan, as I was at one time a schoolteacher. Vocabulary items are still taught in isolation, though the Communicative Language Teaching approach stresses the importance of teaching vocabulary items in context. Listening materials are not used by the majority of schoolteachers, which is most probably because of the limited number of cassette recorders and the large number of teachers at the same school. Therefore, teachers try to read dialogues to their students, and this does not provide the learners with the necessary native speaker model. This also demotivates the learners and makes them bored. Dialogues are designed to be read by two or three partners, not by the teacher alone, who would read role A and role B with the same voice and intonation. This is probably due to the effect of the audio-lingual method, which was used in Jordan until the early eighties. Teachers were taught by this method. Part of my experience as a teacher and teacher trainer, I feel that the Teacher-training programmes were not very successful in changing the teachers' methodology. The adopted

methodology is claimed to be eclectic and focuses on communicative approaches to language teaching, but because of teachers' practices in the classroom it is more likely a grammar translation method.

Lack of the target language exposure as spoken by its native speakers could be another reason behind the English majors' weakness in communication. Before 1983, the English Language Department at Yarmouk University used to bring over American groups in the summer to teach two English language courses. They used to teach 'English Pronunciation' and 'Stress and Intonation' in which students attended tutorials all day long. It was called "The English Village". Most of the students' speaking-time was in English since they were exposed to the target language as presented by its native speakers. That was a very helpful experience for English major graduates. Unfortunately, the English Department is no longer interested in doing this. In addition, currently about 94% of the professors in the English Language Department are native speakers of Arabic. In the academic year 2000/2001, there were two Americans professors out of a total of about 30 staff members. This means that the students might not have enough exposure to the target language as spoken by its native speakers, especially with respect to stress and intonation.

Motivation also plays an important part in improving and developing the learners' communicative ability. Attitudinal studies conducted on Arab students, such as those of Zughoul and Taminian,1984, Salih, 1980 and Harrison et al., 1975, have consistently shown that Arab students are instrumentally motivated to learn English and that they are well aware of the utility of knowing English (Zughoul, 1987:225). This means that the main stimulus for learning English

is instrumental, i.e. to achieve a goal, e.g. a career. It is true that some learners are integratively motivated, but they are in a minority. According to Seedhouse (1996: 69), those with integrative motivation have a genuine interest in "the target speech community" which the learner is "aspiring to become a member of". But I do not think that there are many English majors who desire to be part of an English-speaking community. It might be true that a few of them have such desire, but the majority of English majors join the English language department because it will be easier for them to get a job with a BA in English than in any other specialisation.

Communicative Competence

The ultimate goal of English language teaching is to develop the learners' communicative competence which will enable them to communicate successfully in the real world. Communicating successfully refers to passing on a comprehensible message to the listener. According to Canale (1983) communicative competence comprises of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

Strategic competence refers to the individual's ability to use 'communication strategies', e.g. paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, mime, to get their message across and to compensate for a limited or imperfect knowledge of rules or the interference of such factors such as fatigue, distraction or inattention.

Tarone and Yule (1989:105) believe that strategic competence includes "the ability to select an effective means of performing a communicative act ... strategic competence is gauged, not by degree of correctness ... but rather by degree of success, or effectiveness"

According to Tarone and Yule (ibid.), there are two areas related to strategic competence:

> (1) the overall skill of a learner in successfully transmitting information to a listener, or interpreting information transmitted and (2) the use of communication strategies by a speaker or listener when problems arise in the process of transmitting information (P.103).

Defining Communication Strategies

It is difficult to find a rigorous definition of communication strategies on which CS researchers have reached an agreement. There have been many definitions proposed for the communication strategies of second language learners. The following definitions will provide us with an insight into the nature of communication strategies.

> *Learners' attempt to bridge the gap between their linguistic competence in the target language and that of the target language interlocutors,* (Tarone , 1981 : 288)

> *CSs are potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal (Faerch and Kasper, 1983: 36)*

> *Communication strategies, i.e., techniques of coping with difficulties in communicating in an imperfectly known second language (Stern, 1983: 411)*

> *....all attempts to manipulate a limited linguistic system in order to promote communication. Should learning result from the exercise, the strategy has also*

functioned as a learning strategy, but there is no inherent feature of the strategy itself which can determine which of these roles it will serve (Bialystok, 1983: 102 – 103)

Compensatory strategies are strategies which a language user employs in order to achieve his intended meaning on becoming aware of problems arising during the planning phase of an utterance due to his own linguistic shortcomings (Poulisse, 1990 : 88).

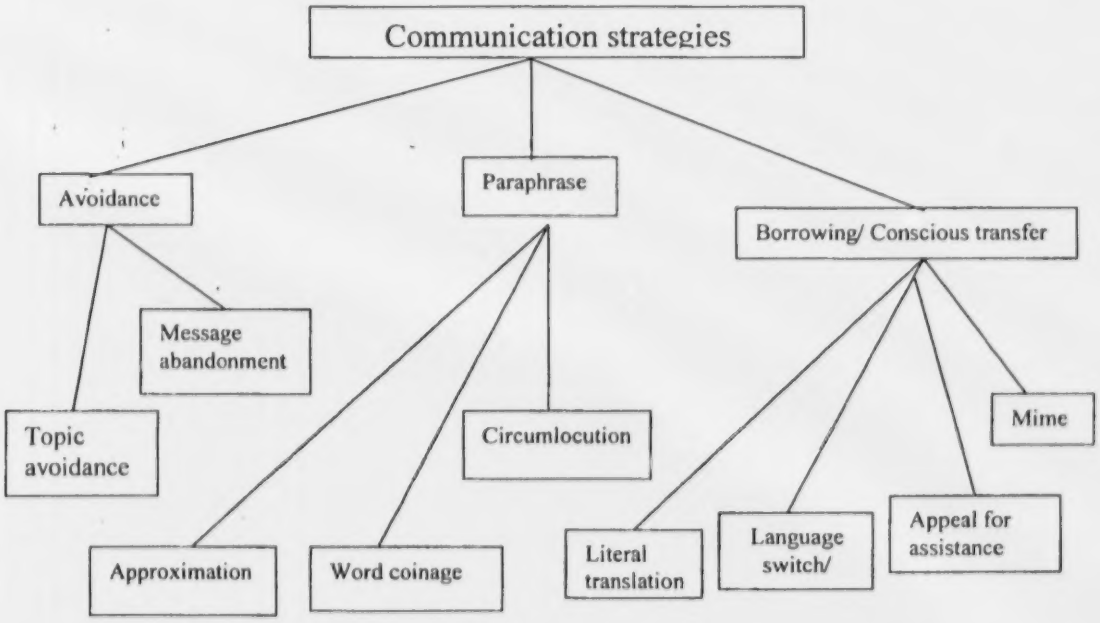
the conscious employment by verbal or non-verbal mechanisms for communicating an idea when precise linguistic forms are for some reasons not available to the learner at that point in communication (Brown, 1987: 180).

The key defining criteria for CSs are 'problematicity' and 'consciousness'. All the previously mentioned definitions support the claim that CSs are employed when L2 learners encounter a problem in communication. Tarone's (1977), Faerch and Kasper's (1983a), and Brown's (1987) definitions emphasise the idea that CSs may be used consciously. Faerch and Kasper (1983a) see problem orientation and potential consciousness as defining criteria of communication strategies. This is very clear in their definition of CSs as "potentially conscious plans for solving what to an individual presents itself as a problem in reaching a particular communicative goal" (ibid:36.). The ultimate aim after using communication strategies is to achieve a communicative goal.

Taxonomies of Communication Strategies

There is no consensus among researchers over a taxonomy of communication strategies. It is very clear in the literature that a single utterance may be labelled under two different categories. Cook (1993) argues that " if the lists were standardised, at least, there would be an agreement about such categories" (P. 133). Researchers develop and propose new taxonomies of communication strategies from time to time. Tarone's taxonomy of CSs (1977/1983) is discussed here as it is considered the basis of all proposed taxonomies. See figure (1) below.

Figure (1) Tarone's Taxonomy of Communication Strategies (Adapted from Tarone, 1983:62-63)



The taxonomies of Tarone (1977), Faerch and Kasper (1983a, 1983b), Bialystok (1983), and Willems (1987), show many similarities. Thus, Bialystok (1990) remarked:

> ... the variety of taxonomies proposed in the literature differ primarily in terminology and overall categorizing principle rather than in the substance of the specific strategies. If we ignore, then, differences in the structure of the taxonomies by abolishing the various overall categories, then a core group of specific strategies that appear consistently across the taxonomies clearly emerges.... Differences in the definitions and illustrations for these core strategies across the various studies are trivial (Bialystok, 1990, p. 61).

Use of CSs Leads to Learning

Language learners often use communication strategies to cope with the problems they encounter while attempting to speak a foreign or a second language. They attempt to solve communication problems when they lack adequate competence in the target language. When faced with such problems, they may try to avoid particular language or grammatical items; paraphrase when they do not have the appropriate form or construction; ask the interlocutor for the correct form; use gestures to convey meaning; insert a word or a phrase from their first language; apply L2 morphology and/or phonology to L1 lexical items; translate literally, or they may use word coinage which produces items that do not exist in the target language to achieve their communicative goals. This phenomenon exists even in first languages. Sometimes there are words that we do not know in our native language, so we try to convey the meaning to the listener by means of paraphrase, description and gesture (verbal and non-verbal CSs). I will add my personal experience here to illustrate this phenomenon, i.e., CSs. Once I want to buy some spare parts for my car, I usually know what I want, but the exact word or expression in my native language (Arabic) is lacking, so I use its shape, size, function, where it is fixed, etc. to describe it and make myself comprehensible to the shopkeeper. Then the shopkeeper says "Aha! you want this part! Here you are." As a result of negotiating meaning with the shopkeeper, I get the exact

word. If I then need this spare part again at a later date, I will go to the shop and ask for it using the correct expression without resorting to any communication strategy.

With L2 (English), the problem is greater, and the use of some CSs may also lead to learning. Once I wanted to sell my furniture and a Filippino rang me up. The following conversation took place:

The Speaker : You have an ad in the newspaper regarding the household items for sale.
The Author: Yes. How can I help you?
The Speaker: Do you have a shoe rack?
The Author : Pardon? (The author could not make out 'shoe rack' as a result of the speaker's pronunciation, which was not understood because it was not clear to me).
The Speaker : The place where you keep shoes.
The Author : No , I don't.
The Speaker : OK. Thank you.
The Author: You're welcome.

In the above conversation, both the author and the caller used communication strategies. The author initiated repair when he said 'pardon' because he did not catch the caller's word(s). On the other hand, the caller resorted to a CS to repair the problem and make her message comprehensible. Maybe she used a communication strategy because she thought that the author did not know the meaning of "shoe-rack". This conversation is an example of the negotiation of meaning, and use of CSs, which can lead to learning. Suppose that I did not know what the word "shoe rack" meant, then at the end of the conversation I would be able to add a new words to my competence. This is an example of when negotiation of meaning can take place through direct

exposure to the target language in real-life situations, as opposed to the classroom, which might not be an ideal environment for acquiring a foreign language.

Conclusion and Pedagogical implications

To conclude, Arab learners face many problems in all the language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. The great number of erroneous utterances that Arab learners of English produce in oral performance and their recourse to communication strategies, as shown in the author's study (Author, 2001) is an indication of how serious the problem is. It is also an indication that the objectives of the English departments in the Arab world, and more specifically in Jordan, have not yet been achieved, and that this situation requires a solution.

The place of CSs in language teaching has been a source of considerable controversy in the past twenty years, ranging from strong support for training learners in the classroom to opposition to strategy training based on the claim that strategic competence develops in one's native language and is transferable to the target language.

I am in support of the idea of raising the learners' awareness of the nature and communicative potential of CSs by making them conscious of the CSs existing in their repertoire, and sensitizing them to the appropriate situations. Teachers can provide their students with samples of L2 production to identify and classify their communication strategies. This will make them aware of their problems during the course of communication and resort to CSs to solve them. Exposure to the target language is also essential. The more the student is exposed to the target language, the faster and easier it will be to assimilate the language.

The results of the author's study (Author, 2001) showed that even weak learners were good at transmitting comprehensible and successful messages. This is probably a result of the use of communication strategies. University students and school learners should, therefore, be aware of these strategies and understand their value. Weak learners will like the idea as it makes things easier for them and helps them to solve their communication problems.

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